

# Changing Channels

Glenn Garvin on TV



Special pricing on TiVo® DVRs!  
Get yours today.

## About Changing Channels

E-mail Glenn Garvin  
Recent Columns

## Recent Posts

Ratings catch NBC's 'The Chase'  
Fox News crew beaten in Cairo  
It's NOT snowing. It's NOT, it's NOT, it's NOT!  
'The Kennedys' will air on ReelzChannel  
Drug war: Let's say we won and get out  
CBS juggles around Sheen's absence  
Tribune Broadcasting may buy 'The Kennedys'  
Screen Gems: TV the week of January 30  
Piers Morgan: Boobs! Sex tapes! No viewers!  
Friday afternoon, and the readin' is easy

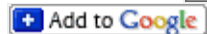


**Glenn Garvin**  
Miami Herald Television Critic  
E-mail || Bio

## Herald Blogs

News, Entertainment and More

Syndicate this site



Add me to your TypePad  
People list

Powered by TypePad

« Screen Gems: TV the week of August 3 | Main | Dish Network dumps another channel; could 'Swingtown' be next? »

## Clay T. Whitehead, RIP



Judging a life from the headlines attached to it can be a grave mistake. That's certainly the case with Clay T. Whitehead, the former Nixon White House aide who died last month at the age of 69. He spent virtually his whole life working to expand the television universe and break viewers out of the three-channel monopoly that dominated the industry for its first 40 years. But that struggle was conducted completely outside public view. Whitehead's single brush with fame ran in quite the opposite direction.

In 1973, while heading Nixon's Office of Telecommunications Policy, Whitehead gave a widely reported speech lashing out against liberal bias in TV network news -- what he called "ideological plugola" of "so-called professionals who confuse sensation with sense and who dispense elitist gossip in the guise of news analysis." Whitehead said the White House

## Search This Blog

## February 2011

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

## Categories

Books  
Broadband TV  
Broadcast series  
Business side of TV  
Cable series  
Cable service  
Commercials  
Critics' press tour  
Emmys and other awards  
Fall season  
FCC and regulation  
Mailbag  
Music  
New networks  
Newscasts & journalists  
Op-Ed columns  
Radio  
Ratings  
Satellite television  
Secret Stuff  
Sports  
The Sopranos  
TiVo/DVRs  
TV on DVD  
Video hardware

## Archives

February 2011  
January 2011  
December 2010  
November 2010  
October 2010  
September 2010  
August 2010  
July 2010  
June 2010  
May 2010

would introduce legislation that would revoke the licenses of local stations that "fail to act to correct imbalance or consistent bias from the networks."

The speech, coming on the heels of Vice President Spiro Agnew's repeated tirades against the media, won him a reputation as a Nixonian hatchetman. Unlike Agnew's rhetoric, Whitehead's threat had real teeth. Revoking stations' licenses for bias in a network newscast -- whether real or imagined -- would have quickly led to the end of network news. How could a station manager in Hutchinson, Kansas, or Roswell, New Mexico, possibly be expected to fact-check a Walter Cronkite newscast in advance? Time magazine, in a fairly typical (and reasonably accurate) attack, called Whitehead's speech "a blatant attempt to use the government's licensing power to enforce certain political views or standards."

There was less publicity when Whitehead, soon after, apologized to broadcasters for the speech -- and less still for the fact that the legislation he mentioned was never introduced. For the rest of the Nixon administration, Whitehead's name was pretty much synonymous with Agnew's, at least among the general public. Only a few industry insiders understood that in the White House, Whitehead was actually working for policies that would eventually lead to the creation of cable television as we know it today, offering Americans a broad spectrum of voices not only in entertainment programming but in news and public affairs as well. You can [read my full account of his pioneering work in Sunday's Miami Herald](#).

I've always assumed that Whitehead was a dedicated culture warrior who simply changed tactics, deciding that diluting the power of the networks through deregulation would be easier than beating them over the head with license revocations. But Brian Lamb, who worked for Whitehead in the Office of Telecommunications Policy and later went on to found CSPAN, told me last week that he never believed Whitehead was much concerned about liberal bias at the networks at all. Whitehead, Lamb says, was simply trying to placate the real White House hatchetman, Nixon adviser Charles Colson, who subsequently went to jail for his role in the Watergate scandal.


"You've got to remember that we were always looking over our shoulders in that White House," Lamb said. "They were a lot more interested in fighting with the Democrats over Vietnam and Watergate than in telecommunications policy. They wanted everything we did to be a part of that fight. And Colson was the big gun. He could have shut us down at any time. In fact, he almost did when [Whitehead] called for the abolition of the Fairness Doctrine."

What Whitehead was really interested in, Lamb says, was diversity in broadcasting. "He wanted more voices, more voices, always more voices," Lamb declares. He certainly got them. Take a look at this week's TV schedule: Bill Maher, Jon Stewart, Bill O'Reilly, Keith Olbermann, Nancy Grace, Glenn Beck, Stephen Colbert. Without cable television, we wouldn't have any of them, and without Clay T. Whitehead, we wouldn't have cable.

---

Posted by Glenn Garvin at 10:20 AM in [Cable series](#), [Cable service](#), [FCC and regulation](#), [Newscasts & journalists](#) | [Permalink](#)

## Comments

 You can follow this conversation by subscribing to the [comment feed](#) for this post.

The comments to this entry are closed.

